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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 000536

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CARTOON-WEARING MINISTER RESIGNS

REF: (A) TRIPOLI 58 (B) TRIPOLI 55 (C) ROME 460

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor David D. Pearce,
for reasons 1.5 (b)(d)

1. (C) Summary. Italy's Reforms Minister resigned February 18 following violent protests against the Italian consulate in Benghazi. The minister, Roberto Calderoli of the Northern League, had won notoriety for wearing T-shirts emblazoned with cartoons that had triggered protests in Islamic countries. PM Berlusconi reportedly will not fill Calderoli's position before April elections. Meanwhile, seventy Italians were evacuated from Libya. Berlusconi called Qaddafi and the two agreed the incident was serious but should not disrupt bilateral relations. Emergency intra-party talks on the center-right concluded that Calderoli's resignation would not undermine the Northern League's position within the ruling coalition. In fact, the Northern League won Berlusconi's support for a five-point electoral program that included key pro-Christian and anti-immigrant planks of the League's platform. Growing concern about attacks on Christians is feeding the center-right's family/Italian values campaign. Rome magistrates are investigating Calderoli for violating laws that prohibit expressing contempt for religion. But the minister's publicity stunt probably earned both votes and support for the Northern League's anti-immigrant, particularly anti-Muslim, policies. End summary.

2. (U) Following violent demonstrations February 17 against the Italian consulate in Benghazi (Refs A and B) which resulted in at least 11 deaths, Northern League party Minister for Reforms Roberto Calderoli conceded to pressure and tendered his resignation February 18. Italy evacuated 70 citizens from Libya over the weekend, although FM Fini is quoted as suggesting the demonstrations were sparked more by domestic opposition to Qaddafi than by the cartoons. PM Berlusconi called Qaddafi February 18 to confirm the GOI considered the attack on the consulate serious but said that the incident would not disrupt bilateral relations. Qaddafi reportedly offered guarantees that Libya would continue to provide Italy with natural gas supplies. The MFA continues to carefully monitor reaction to the cartoons in Islamic countries.

League Wins Support

3. (C) Berlusconi announced that he will not fill Calderoli's position before the April elections. However, Calderoli's actions led to an emergency meeting of the center-right that confirmed the resignation will not undermine the Northern League's position in the ruling coalition. In fact, the League won support from Berlusconi for its five-point electoral platform. The planks include: a defense of Italy's Christian roots; "fiscal federalism" that translates into the ability of regions to collect taxes on their own; pro-family policies to include tax benefits for having children and recognition for only heterosexual marriages; immigration policy aimed against "clandestini" (illegals) and legal immigration under quotas, but only for countries that reflect Italian "cultural" values; and, a promise to support the upcoming referendum on devolution (not all members of the coalition share the League's passion on this topic).

Mixed Messages

4. (U) Rome magistrates announced they will open an investigation of whether Calderoli violated laws that prohibit expressing contempt for religion. Berlusconi was quoted in the weekend papers as being concerned that the Calderoli incident not alienate moderate Muslims, and Fini paid a surprise visit to the Rome mosque. The Minister of Interior's Muslim Consultative Council has condemned the cartoons but called for only peaceful, legal demonstrations against them. Pope Benedict has publicly called for an end to the violent reactions to the cartoons.

5. (C) On the other hand, the T-shirt debacle, combined with press coverage of global attacks on priests and Christian churches, is fueling a growing public and private chorus of concern about defending Christianity from Islam. The murder of an Italian priest in Turkey and reported

attacks against churches and Christians in Nigeria and Libya has increased public concerns. Senate President Pera warned that "if we genuflect to them, we are lost." Editorials are questioning the limits of tolerance and wondering if Italy should stop succumbing to the Stockholm syndrome of defending its captors. This drumbeat also coincides neatly with the center-right's family values/Italian identity electoral campaign. And Calderoli certainly calculated the effect of his publicity stunt, which was designed both to attract votes and bolster his position within the Northern League party. Since Umberto Bossi's stroke in 2004, there has been a growing power struggle over leadership of the League.

16. (C) Comment: The Calderoli affair has spurred public debate over defending Christian identity and values. Inevitably, the discussion has also tied in immigration policy. And while Calderoli may have stepped down from government, his actions probably earned both votes and support for the Northern League's anti-immigrant, and particularly anti-Muslim, policies.
SFOGLI